



# Aloka News

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**SAPRI wishes its Friends and Well-wishers a Happy New Year!**



## Building Religious Harmony Programme of SAPRI - Recap of a Productive Year

Year 2017 saw SAPRI's 'Building Religious Harmony' initiative making new grounds, building on its experience and establishing brighter hopes for the future. The programme, which recognizes the potential of ground level activists to trigger positive change, resulted in a fine harvest throughout the year as the grassroots willingly undertook to put what they learnt during SAPRI's capacity building and training of trainers (ToT) workshops to practice. With the year about to make way to a promising 2018, here is a recap of what is worth reminiscing as landmarks of the passing year.



invitation of former Canadian High Commissioner Shelly Whiting. The roundtable was a part of the follow up on projects carried out through the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI). SAPRI was an implementing partner of the CFLI programme in the year 2015/2016. Besides members of the High Commission, Non-governmental and Civil Society members who had been implementing partners of CFLI were also present.

**April 23<sup>rd</sup>:** SAPRI's Rathnapura District Coordinating Committee member and Member of Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council Mr. Ariyawansa Basooriya organized a Sinhala/Tamil New Year celebration in Kolonna in Rathnapura District, that exceeded cultural boundaries. The novelty of the new year celebration was the involvement of pre-school children from different ethnic backgrounds, through presentation of dance items depicting both cultures. The enthusiastic participation of the children was a treat to watch. It was the first instance of a New Year celebration organized for pre-school children, to promote ethno-cultural harmony.

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## SAPRI with Moulavis in Mannar: The Latest Chapter of Building Tolerance



Marking the expansion of its Building Religious Harmony initiative, the South Asia Policy & Research Institute (SAPRI) reached out to the district of Mannar in the Northern Province by organising a participatory

workshop for Muslim Moulavis in the district, in collaboration with “Bridging Lanka”, an NGO in Sri Lanka having a partnership with an Australia based organization promoting ethnoreligious and social integration. Al Azhar National School served as the venue of the event that took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2017.

Mannar, a district with a majority population of Muslims and Tamils, is considered one of the most underdeveloped districts in the country. The district has 96 mosques and 5 madrasas. The workshop therefore was intended to test the waters of reception of the rural Muslim religious community towards interfaith dialogue and communal integration.

The workshop agenda targeted the participants to utilize Islamic teachings to form responses to modern-day issues including religious intolerance. The workshop expected that the empowerment of Moulavis will result in their playing a leadership role mitigating acts of religious intolerance. The session was interactive, and engaged the participants to open up and share their views and perceptions on the observance of religious harmony and coexistence in their district as well as in the country. Open discussion of haunting wounds and concerns of the community is a tried and tested method of SAPRI, to innovate practical and community driven solutions to ground level issues.

The Moulavis recognized a number of potential hindrances to effective interfaith dialogue, including the language barrier. The workshop itself was conducted in Tamil. The lack of formal education other than the Islamic education received at Madrasas was recognized as an issue, which was also linked to the lack of self-confidence of the participants. The workshop saw ice breaker activities that encouraged collective thinking, which laid the foundation for a successful and cooperative group activity session that followed.

Activities on the importance of clear communication were conducted which were amusing, while conveying the message of clarity and cooperation necessary in effective communication. The group activity session was then conducted, to get specific suggestions and ideas of the participants on the issues they face as Moulavis within their communities.

SAPRI representatives received overwhelming gratitude from the participant Moulavis of the workshop, for organizing an event that encouraged retrospection as well as an open discussion on common concerns faced by Muslim clergy members, which would undoubtedly lead toward the promotion of a tolerant society. The programme ‘Building Religious Harmony’ is one of SAPRI’s prominent efforts that is on-going, having begun in 2013. Similar workshops targeting clergy representatives were previously conducted as intra-faith sessions in several districts including Galle, Puttalam and Kegalle, while several interfaith sessions were held in Imbulpe / Belihuloya with the participation of clergy from all major religions in the country.

# Achieving ‘Zero Hunger’ in Sri Lanka through Improved Food and Nutrition Security

## *In discussion with Ms. Brenda Barton, Representative and Country Director of WFP in Sri Lanka*

The fight against hunger and malnutrition is a topic that has both a local and global relevance. Identifying the global need for increased access to nutritious food, the United Nations (UN) called on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and, promote sustainable agriculture, endorsed by the 192 member states and global civil society.

The government of Sri Lanka pledged to support the 17 goals, to be completed by 2030, with an emphasis on poverty, hunger, education, energy, inequalities, urban development, and climate change at the UN Sustainable Development Summit, 2015 in New York.

The South Asia Policy and Research Institute (SAPRI), which focuses largely on Poverty Alleviation and Economic Development, launched a programme with the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), with former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Chair, SAPRI as its lead convener, to conduct a national strategic review of food security and nutrition towards zero hunger, the target of SDG2.



Ms. Brenda Barton-  
Country Director, WFP

The report was formulated with the consultation and active involvement of a multi-stakeholder participation representing the government at the national, provincial and local level; the private sector; the academia; the civil society and non-governmental organizations, and UN Agencies. The strategic review was inaugurated in September 2016 and the report was launched in February 2017 in the presence of the then Executive Director of WFP, Ertharin Cousin.

SAPRI is looking back at the progress of the report since one year of launch- in discussion with Ms. Brenda Barton, to seek her views on the strategic review initiative and expectations on food security and nutrition in Sri Lanka.

### ❖ What is the role of WFP in Sri Lanka?

Director Ms. Barton observed that the agency adds value to the country as a UN agency, as a niche in food security and nutrition. At the moment, it is nutrition taking priority due to the nutrition deficiency in the country that has remained stagnant over a period of time. “We use our resources and findings to see where we can contribute to the betterment of the country, by giving the government a hand up, rather than a hand down”.

### ❖ What is WFP’s model of achieving a designated goal?

The Country Director commented that the Programs are in consultation with the government of the country concerned as long as it has a role to play, with the invitation of the particular government. “We focus on forming a strategy together, with a joint identification of problems and measures to tackle them. As we are about to celebrate 50 years of our partnership with the Sri Lankan Government, there is a current shift towards providing technical assistance, instead of a financial aid oriented approach, for better results”.

### ❖ How has the launch of the Strategic Review helped?

The Strategic Review conducted in partnership with the government of Sri Lanka and SAPRI was crucial in a number of aspects. The Review allowed UN and other multi-stake holders to converge and consult regarding SDG 2

such as the government, civil society, private sector and UN agencies as well as the academia joining hands on one specific topic. “The final outcome of the effort became the blue print which guides WFP’s road map for the next 5 years to come” emphasized the Country Director.

“It is also worthwhile to mention that WFP did not innovate anything novel. The findings were the convergence of already existing data, facts and information, which, with the aid of experts from relevant different fields, was compiled as a document that could serve as a source of reference for the concerned stakeholders towards achieving the end goal”.

#### ❖ What are the current ground level initiatives aimed at the achievement of Zero Hunger?

“We are currently planning awareness programs targeting policy makers, the private sector and grassroots communities, to achieve behavioral change communication. These programs aim to help the target groups to be aware of the types of food to consume, with a broad understanding of the variety of concerns underlying their food habits and their impacts. There are also a number of emergency preparedness tools that are put in place, to help the government with information and decision making in both slow and fast onsets which refer to droughts and floods respectively. Our School Meals Program is also an effective program in place, to mitigate the negative correlation between economic hardships and malnutrition of children”.

#### ❖ Challenges to the culmination of Zero Hunger in Sri Lanka

Ms. Barton was of the view that “Despite the existence of many entities, food security and nutrition together do not fall under a specific ministry. As a result, it is not prioritized by any entity. The lack of awareness regarding proper nutrition which is a result of the lack of nutrition communication is also an existent issue”.

#### ❖ WFP Sri Lanka’s message for the New Year

“While wishing the global community a prosperous New Year, I invite them to make strategic investments in areas such as nutrition and early warning systems that could lower the price tags of food for needy communities, thus making a significant difference. I invite them to continue helping countries such as Sri Lanka by providing resources and expertise in ways that are impactful and investment oriented,” Ms. Brenda Barton concluded.

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**April 6<sup>th</sup>:** SAPRI’s Religious Harmony Coordinator in Rakwana, Begum A.R. Aneesha collaborated with the Principal of Oxford International School in Rakwana to organize a multi-ethnic celebration of the Sinhala-Tamil New Year in Rakwana,, with approximately 200 students participating. The event gave prominence to traditions and customs of both ethnicities, followed by merry-making games and competitions for the participant multi ethnic children

**September 16<sup>th</sup>:** SAPRI’s Puttalam District Coordinating Committee hosted an interfaith dialogue, involving Buddhist and Islam clergy representatives, at Buddhist Dhamma School in Bodhirukkharama Temple in Puttalam. Dhamma School students were invited to interact with the Clergy present and were seen asking questions. They inquired about Islam and Islamic religious beliefs and practices from Moulavi Sabreen of Grand Mosque, Puttalam, and Mr. K.T Haroon, Vice Principal of St. Andrews College, Kalpitiya. The outcome of the event was an invitation of the Muslim representatives to the Dhamma School students to visit the mosque for a similar session.

**October 23<sup>rd</sup>:** The SAPRI team visited Galle for a meeting with the Galle District Coordinating Committee to assess the progress of the Religious Harmony program in the district. The meeting saw key clergy members of the committee sharing their experiences in the district's interfaith relations and conflict mitigation.

**October 28<sup>th</sup> :** A SAPRI delegation visited Kurunegala to ascertain from the District Coordinating Committee the activities conducted on building religious harmony in the district and prospects for Year 2018. The meeting witnessed eager responses from the participants, with encouraging propositions to expand the program further in the district.

**November 8<sup>th</sup> :** A delegation of the Kurunegala District Coordinating Committee visited the SAPRI Secretariat. The visiting team, consisting of government servants, entrepreneurs and former Local Governing Council Members expressed their interest to continue with district level activities and their willingness to support SAPRI to further expand the programme in Kurunegala. They particularly pledged support for linking women with SAPRI's activities on Religious Harmony in the district.

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### Donkeys bridging Mannar: Reconciliation lessons of Human-Donkey Camaraderie



With a three-decade long war leaving development and reconciliation a challenge, the importance of community specific initiatives prevails for meeting the challenge. SAPRI, during its recent visit to Mannar recognized how an overlooked feral animal could prove to be the district's answer to post war community cooperation and development. Hence, SAPRI made notes of the peace promoting role of donkeys in Mannar.

**An animal down from hero to zero >** Once referred to as 'Donkey Town', Mannar's donkey population goes back for centuries. Believed to be brought in by Arabic traders, they were used for transportation of goods including Ceylon's famous spices. The importance of donkeys within the community declined since the start of the war, with little attention paid to their welfare. With Bridging Lanka, an Australia based community development organization recognizing the opportunity donkeys present on community building, the problem of 'stray' donkeys has been transformed to a potential solution.

**Donkey Therapy: Panacea for post war healing >** Bridging Lanka has initiated 'Donkey Assisted Therapy' (DAT) Centre, considered the first such establishment in Asia. The animal is utilized to improve the condition of children hampered with autism, Down's Syndrome, as well as learning disabilities, hearing and speech impairments. Donkey Therapy is world renown to assist children and adults alike with mental disabilities.

The donkeys are further utilized to treat patients with post conflict trauma, as a much sought-after method of psychotherapy for a war affected area. “We are already seeing improvement in human-donkey relations as a result, with children eager to befriend donkeys and spend time with them in our walk-in facility”. A Bridging Lanka representative stated.

**Reintegration- A must learn lesson >** Bridging Lanka has set up donkey feeding stations outside metropolitan areas, conditioning the animals to gradually move from urbanized areas, to more secluded terrains. Donkeys are also relocated in batches of 25, with an assessment of their conditions which includes medical treatment and castration, in a bid to sustainably administer their population. Further, animal lovers are encouraged to invest in and adopt a donkey, which is expected to encourage the locals to resume their donkey domestication traditions.

The Mannar donkey initiative conveys effectively the mitigation and alleviation possibilities of grievances. Above all, the biggest lesson the donkey story has on offer, is that intervention based on local mores, is more appropriate to change the thinking of a community towards sustainable peace.

### SAPRI Team Meets with Religious Harmony Committee Members

Programme Officers Aruni Samarakoon and Thanura Mendis of SAPRI visited Galle and Kurunegala in October 2017 to meet with members of SAPRI’s Religious Harmony Working Committees in the two respective districts to discuss the activities conducted in the two districts, and the challenges faced during the process, as well as the future programmes and how SAPRI could assist them in those endeavours.

Following the comprehensive programme on “Building Religious Harmony” conducted by SAPRI in eight districts from 2014-16, including Capacity Building workshops and Training of Trainers (ToT) workshops, District Working Committees have taken the onus of carrying forward the programme and conducting activities in the districts on their own initiative, often with the participation of school children from multi-religious background.

At the meetings in both Galle and Kurunegala, the Committee members emphasized the importance of implementing religious harmony programs in areas having a multi-religious population in the country as those programs would support the building of peace and reconciliation among the different religious and ethnic communities. They appreciated the contribution of Madam Chandrika Kumaratunga, Chair, SAPRI and SAPRI officials towards the reconciliation effort in Sri Lanka through SAPRI’s “Building Religious Harmony” initiative.

The meeting in **Galle** took place at the Buddhist Meditation Center, Galle, with the participation of Venerable Kegalle Pagngnarama Thero, Rev. Father Nihal Nanayakkara, Ven. Kurukkal R. Thatchaumoorthy, Moulavi Khaleefa, Moulavi A.W.M. Rafeeq Alim, High Priest, Sulaimaniya Thaika, Galle, Moulavi, M.A.Shaik Abdul Carder, Mr. K. Manickam, Secretary, Sri Lanka Kathiravela Swamy Kovil Trust and Mr. Rajiv Hewage, Executive Director, Caritas SED- Galle.

The Committee members spoke on their collective work against any type of racism, violence, and discrimination in the district. “Multi religious leaders in Galle are the primary actors in addressing religious violence and recovering social harmony, therefore religious leaders play an impartial and just role in rebuilding the trust within the community”, they emphasised.

The meeting of SAPRI officials with the Religious Harmony Working Committee of SAPRI in **Kurunegala** took place on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2017 at Hangout Hotel, Kurunegala. Those present were, Mr. Sarath Rathnayake (Political Activist/Businessman), Mr. Sivagnanam, Mr. W Ratnayake, Mr. Gnaweera Dissanayake, Ms. I.M Daya Ariyawathie Secretary, SAPRI Religious Harmony Working Committee in Kurunegala, Mr. I.B Nandasena, Mr. P.D Gunathilake,

Mr. G.L GaminiPerera, Mr. Aziz, Mr. H.M Piyadasa, Mr. M.H.M Farook (Vice President of Farmers' Association, Ganewatta, Kuruneagala), Mr. Ananda Sikuraajapathi, Ms. K. Pushpalatha and Mr. W.M Wijayanath. I. Dicklash, (Wehera Town Council member and retired Sri Lankan Air- Force officer), Mr. Gamini Perera, (representative of the Catholic church).

The composition of participants was multi religious, involving Buddhists as well as Hindu, Christian/Catholic and Islamic representatives. During the discussion with SAPRI officials they underscored the necessity to develop a cordial relationship among different religious communities while respecting cultural diversity. "It is important to discuss any existing undercurrents in the open, rather than allow suspicion to simmer into violence", they said. The role of religion in promoting peace and harmony was stressed while appreciating the contribution of the civil society in this effort.

Following the meeting in Kurunegala, the members of the Kurunegala Working Committee who could not attend the meeting, visited SAPRI office in **Colombo** on 8<sup>th</sup> November, for a discussion on the Religious Harmony programme. Their enthusiasm on the programme was well reflected by the effort of travelling down to Colombo for the meeting. The group included, Former Local Council Member Indika Nayakaratna; Small Scale Entrepreneur Manoj Rajapaksa; Samurdhi Officer Manjula Dasanayake; and Small-Scale Entrepreneur Sanath Padamasiri. The SAPRI team comprised Executive Director Geetha de Silva and Programme Officers Aruni Samarakoon and Thanura Mendis.

The visiting group appreciated the work of SAPRI and focused on the importance of continuing an interfaith dialogue in Kurunegala District, as the area can become a 'hot spot' due to the ethnic and religious diversity in the district. The group was keen that SAPRI should recommence the series of religious harmony workshops until the committee members were confident enough to take over the work and continue independently.

SAPRI officials commended the efforts of the Committee Members in the two districts in organizing the meetings and briefed them on SAPRI's activities over the years in the districts, with special reference to the Building Religious Harmony programme. Emphasis was made on the keen interest of Chair, SAPRI in peacebuilding and reconciliation related activities in Sri Lanka, and the interest of SAPRI to engage in ground level activities on harmony towards sustainable peace and coexistence in Sri Lanka.

The following views and recommendations emerged from the discussions with Galle and Kurunegala Religious Harmony Working Committee members:

- ❖ *Promoting a 'Trilingual' policy in both the public and private sectors*
- ❖ *Initiating reforms on Education, prioritizing the teaching of Sinhala and Tamil languages in schools*
- ❖ *Appointing 'professionally trained teachers' to teach Sinhala and Tamil languages in schools*
- ❖ *Language is not only reading and writing but a means of communication to learn of the identity, customs, and rituals of other communities.*
- ❖ *Commencing initiatives on religious harmony, focusing on women.*
- ❖ *The necessity to revive SAPRI's Capacity Building and Training of Trainers workshops*
- ❖ *The importance of conducting district level activities to build religious harmony through SAPRI's District Working Committee*

## **Former President Kumaratunga meets with United Nations Secretary General**



Former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Chairperson of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) met with the UN Secretary General António Guterres on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2017, in New York.

During the meeting Madam Kumaratunga briefed the Secretary General on the reconciliation efforts taken by the Government of Sri Lanka and the work carried out by ONUR in that context which was appreciated by the Secretary General.

Madam Kumartunga is also Chair, SAPRI, having founded the Institute in 2009 and heading the SAPRI Board of Directors since its inception.

### **Events attended by SAPRI Officials**

- ❖ SAPRI participated in a discussion forum on ‘Operationalizing the 25% quota for Women in Local Government: Comparative Experience on Advancing Women’s Political Participation’, organized by the UNDP, in collaboration with USAID, Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the UN Women held on 26 July 2017 at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. Programme Officer Aruni Samarakoon represented SAPRI.
- ❖ SAPRI attended a Seminar on ‘Dynamics of Inter-Faith Relations in the Eastern Province in Sri Lanka’, organized by The Asia Foundation, held on 1st of August 2017 at the BMICH. Programme Officer Thanura Mendis was present on this occasion.
- ❖ SAPRI participated in a discussion following a lecture by Mr. Pablo de Greiff, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-recurrence, on ‘Transitional Justice’ at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI) on 20th October 2017. Programme Officer Thanura Mendis represented SAPRI at the event.
- ❖ SAPRI was present at a conference on ‘Religion and Constitutional Practices in Asia’ organized by the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and the Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University of Singapore and held on 9-10 November 2017 at the ICES. Programme Officer Aruni Samarakoon attended on behalf of SAPRI.

